



Other Road Riding Tips

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This information from the Pennsylvania Bicycle Driver's Manual is from the Rodale Press publication "Street Smarts", by John S. Allen, with illustrations by George Retseck and project management by Pat Brown. Project management at the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation was by David Bachman.

Road Riding

WAYS TO DEAL WITH TOUGH SITUATIONS

Let's face it -- some traffic situations go beyond the normal rules. When the traffic system begins to break down because of overcrowding, poor planning and disrespect for the law, you may have to "bushwhack" your way through the mess.

You can emerge safe and maintain the respect of other road users if you're careful. Here are some of the common situations where you have to take the initiative.

WHEN TRAFFIC LIGHTS DON'T TURN

Always stop and wait for red lights. You not only ensure your safety, but also increase respect for cyclists as law-abiding road users.

But some traffic lights don't turn green until they receive a signal from a metal detector buried in the pavement. A bicycle doesn't have enough metal to make many of them work.

Recognize the detector by a square or octagonal pattern of thin lines in the pavement, where slots were cut for the detecting wires. The detector is most sensitive if you ride along one of the wires.

If your bike doesn't trip the detector, you have to wait for a car to do it, or else you have to go through the red light. Going through the red isn't against the law, because the light is defective.

Detectors are made that work for bicycles, at little or no additional cost. Federal design guidelines exist for these detectors. If you put enough pressure on your local and state government, bicyclists can avoid the crashes and the city can avoid the lawsuits which may follow.

GETTING THROUGH TRAFFIC JAMS

Traffic jams don't have to stop you -- that's one of the biggest advantages of bicycling in the city. But in the tight quarters of a tie-up, take extra care. Stopped cars in a traffic jam present the same hazards as parked cars: blindspots, doors and unpredictable starts and turns.

If there is an open passing lane, use it rather than thread between cars. If the street is completely plugged, pick your way forward slowly and with your hands on the brake levers. Remember, any car door could open!

If you're in a traffic jam, you can be fairly sure that the cars will not move, since they have nowhere to go. But if there's an open driveway or parking space into which a car could turn, you have to assume that it will. Look to see whether the car's front wheels are turned. Move away from the side of the car as you pass, and try to get the driver's attention as you approach the front of the car.

When cars are stopped, but not completely bumper to bumper, be very wary of cars from other lanes cutting across in the gaps. Stop and look before you move out into a gap. Be especially careful if the vehicle you're passing, like many vans, doesn't have a hood you can see over.

Don't pass a long truck or bus in a traffic jam unless there's a full, open lane next to it. If you ride close to the side of such a vehicle it may begin to merge toward you, leaving you no way to escape.

As you approach an intersection, change lanes to the same position as you would in normal traffic. Before you cross in front of a car to change lanes, make eye contact with the driver even if the car is stopped. When you reach an intersection, wait behind the first car at the traffic light. Don't move up next to that car; drivers don't always use their turn signals, so you don't know for sure which way the car will turn when the light turns green.

These traffic-jam tactics are reasonably safe, but in some cities it may not be legal for a bicyclist to pass on the right or ride between lanes of traffic. On the other hand, it's usually legal for you, or any driver, to cautiously disobey normal traffic rules when the road is "obstructed."

SIDEWALK AND BIKEPATH RIDING

Many people consider sidewalks a safe place to ride because cars don't travel on them. Unfortunately, sidewalks aren't safe. Stay off them, except where you have no choice.

Trees, hedges, parked cars, buildings and doorways create blindspots along a sidewalk, which is too narrow to allow you to swerve out of the way if someone appears. A pedestrian on the sidewalk can sidestep suddenly, or a small child can run out from behind an adult. Never pass a pedestrian until you have his attention.

And cars do use sidewalks -- at every cross street and driveway. Since there are no clear rules for travel on a sidewalk, your only choice is to ride very slowly and look in all directions before crossing a driveway or street.

A bikepath should be used with caution. Even if bicycles are supposed to have the right of way, the path may be too narrow for safe maneuvering. Pedestrians are just as unpredictable, and intersections are often hazardous. A bikepath can get crowded with roller skaters, dog walkers and careless, inexperienced bicyclists.

A bikepath can sometimes provide a useful shortcut, and it can be pleasant and scenic. But don't ride on it just because it's there. Most bikepaths are no place for a fast ride or commuting trip.

AVOIDING THE MOVING BLINDSPOT

On your bicycle, you can see over most cars. You'll become used to this advantage. Don't let it fool you, though. You can't see over a large van, truck or bus. Moving blindspots lurk behind these tall vehicles.

Suppose that you're riding on a two-way, four-lane street. You've merged to the inside lane, because you want to turn left. You signal your left turn and continue to move forward. You see only one other vehicle on the street: a van, coming toward you in the opposite passing lane. It stops to let you turn left. Can you make your turn safely?

No! Since you are moving forward, a blindspot behind the van is "moving toward you." A car could be passing the van in the outside lane, and you would never see that car. If you were to cross in front of the van, you could be met with a terrible surprise.

ARE YOU INVISIBLE?

People will often tell you to "ride as if you were invisible." That advice only makes sense where you're actually hidden by a blindspot. To ride all the time as if you were invisible, you would have to pull off the road whenever a car approaches them from behind. You would also have to stop and wait until traffic clears before crossing any intersection.

Instead, ride to make sure you're visible. Wear bright-colored clothes by day, and use lights and reflectors at night. Also, test to make sure that drivers have seen you. This is the safest way to ride.

How do you test that a driver has seen you? Here's an example. Suppose that you are on a main street, riding toward an intersection. A car is approaching from the right in the cross street, where there's a stop sign. How do you handle it?

MAKING EYE CONTACT

As you approach the intersection, look into the car window and make eye contact with the driver to ascertain that the driver has seen you. Watch for the car to slow down more than it would if you weren't there.

If you look into the driver's window and the driver isn't looking at you, then be very cautious. Even if the car is stopped at the stop sign, a driver who doesn't know you're there

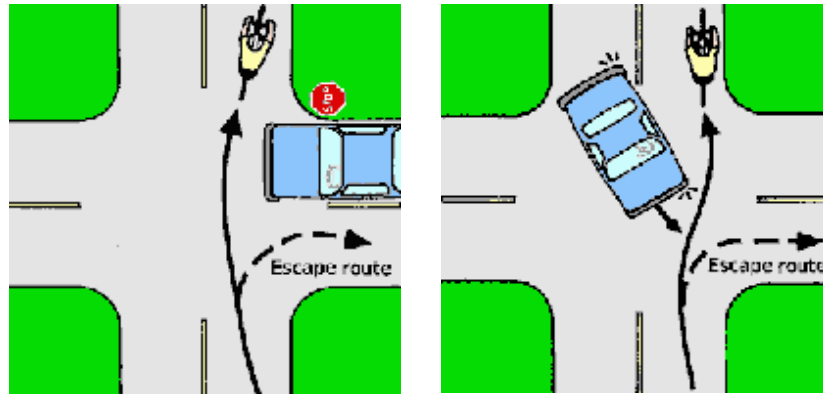
has no reason to stay stopped. Slow down, and call out to get the driver's attention. Proceed only when you're sure that the driver is waiting for you.

DEALING WITH RUDE DRIVERS

Some drivers try to cut across in front of you. They inch out from a driveway or stop sign and treat you as if you have no right to the road.

These drivers seem more dangerous than they actually are. Most drivers who play these tricks are only trying to bluff you. They inch forward with one foot on the gas pedal and the other on the brake pedal, waiting to see whether you'll stop.

Giving in to this bullying will slow you down and leave your self-esteem in shambles. Stand up for your rights. Don't let rude drivers spoil your trip. Outbluff them. Here's how.



In either case (above), to call the bluff on a driver inching out from a stop sign, check behind you for traffic, then keep pedaling as you move farther into your lane.

With a little experience, and after reading the chapter on emergency braking in this booklet, you'll have a good idea of your bike's stopping distance in any situation.

You outbluff a driver by making it clear that you don't intend to stop. Continue to move forward -- and keep pedaling, since your turning pedals are a clear signal to the driver. Meanwhile, figure out when you'll have to hit the brakes, in case the driver pulls out in front of you anyway.

In 999 cases out of 1000, the driver will stop and wait for you before you have to brake. Move right on past the car. In the odd case that the driver doesn't stop, you'll be prepared to brake in time.

The real danger at intersections is from drivers who run stop signs or red lights without even slowing down, or who stop and then start again without looking. But these drivers are rare; crashes tend to deplete their numbers.

REDUCING FRICTION BETWEEN BICYCLISTS AND MOTORISTS

The main way bicyclists annoy motorists is by doing unpredictable maneuvers this booklet warns against.

Fearful instruction -- "always keep away from traffic" -- is passed down to children by parents who don't know much about bicycling -- the blind leading the blind. From about 1930 to 1965, few adults rode bicycles in the United States, and that was long enough for incorrect ideas about bicycling to become deeply rooted.

Certainly, children shouldn't be allowed to ride bicycles in heavy traffic, any more than they should be allowed to drive cars. But that doesn't mean that adult bicyclists should have to ride like children.

There will always be people in cars who yell, "Get off the road." Don't let them bother you. Position yourself to encourage drivers to maneuver around you correctly. If most bicyclists in your community use incorrect maneuvers, drivers will have some trouble understanding your

correct maneuvers. You need to make especially clear signals. With experience, drivers will discover that they have an easier time with bicyclists who use correct maneuvers.

The number of bicyclists is increasing, and in the long run, more drivers will come to understand that it makes sense to share the road. Bicycles use less road space than cars; every person who chooses to ride a bicycle is reducing traffic problems.

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